Remembering Hungarian Communism: Fidesz and the Legacy of 1989

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Introduction

The collapse of communism in Hungary in 1989 marked a historic moment of great political, social and cultural significance. As in countries all over the former Eastern Bloc, the Soviet-aligned communist regime that had ruled for four decades, was toppled. To many, this signified the final triumph of democracy and liberalism that would sound in a modern age of unity with the West. The peaceful nature of its regime change, the negotiated establishment of a democratic state with free and fair elections, and the swift adoption of an open market economy made Hungary one of the frontrunners in the democratisation process of post-communist Europe (Bernhard, 2021). Yet, more than three decades on, the picture is radically different. After regaining governmental power in 2010, ruling party Fidesz under leader Viktor Orbán has been at the centre of a process of democratic erosion. Without any regard for the principles of the rule of law or the fundamental values of the European Union – of which Hungary is still a member – the independence of the judiciary has been defied, media outlets have been taken over and used for state propaganda, political rights and freedoms have been curbed and general corruption has become prominent (Kingsley, 2018). As a consequence, Hungary is now often characterised by experts as a "competitive authoritarian" or "hybrid" regime (Levitsky & Way, 2020; Filippov, 2020), while Orbán himself speaks of an "illiberal democracy" (Orbán, 2014).

In attempting to understand this trajectory, scholars have pointed to the fact that Hungarians experienced economic hardships after the transition to democracy and were thus disappointed in the promise of prosperity that was expected to accompany the dawn of neoliberalism in the country (Lendvai, 2017; Vachudova, 2020). Another significant factor is the legacy of communism and especially of the events of 1989. To comprehend how a populist party like Fidesz was able to rise to power in what had been considered a consolidated democracy, a closer examination of how the memory of Hungarian communism and its end in 1989 has been constructed and weaponised politically, is necessary, for it sheds light on the narratives that Fidesz has leveraged to justify its illiberal agenda.

The role of memory in shaping identity and political outcomes has been gaining increasing attention among sociologists, historians and political scientists. The interdisciplinary field of memory studies explores the ways in which individuals, groups or societies use memory as a tool for remembering the past and considers the role of memory in shaping identity and culture (Erll, 2011). The politics of memory is a subfield of memory studies that examines how memory is shaped by power and politics. Social and political groups construct particular historical narratives and might revise or selectively remember past events for political purposes (Rothberg, 2009). In Hungary, the memory of communism – what it represents,

how it ended and who is responsible – has been a central theme in political discourse since 1989 (Antal, 2019). Competing narratives on the negotiations and compromises surrounding the democratic transition have proven to be fertile ground for different political groups seeking legitimisation of their agenda, mobilisation of support, and the discredit of opponents (Partlett & Küpper, 2022).

This thesis aims to understand the role that the memory of Hungarian communism and its end in 1989 has played in Fidesz's rise to power and the subsequent consolidation of that power. While existing research has mostly emphasised the influence of constitutional reforms, control of the media and economic adversity (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Győrffy, 2020), this study focusses instead on the symbolic and political power of historical narratives. It argues that Fidesz has skilfully used memory politics to weaponise Hungary's collective memory of communist rule and 1989, and that this has been an important factor in its political success. Through strategies like the reinterpretation of particular historical events and the use of emotional and symbolic language in their discourse, the party has created and subsequently institutionalised a narrative of the end of communism as an unfinished transition, abandoned by corrupt elites and only completed by the absolute takeover of Fidesz. It has allowed the party to cultivate a strong sense of collective identity and to clearly distinguish itself from political opponents, who were portrayed as the ideologically suspect continuation of the former communist regime. Most significantly, though, it has enabled Fidesz to gain and maintain political power.

The relevance of this research is illustrated by its potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of how memory and historical narratives can function as a political resource in a post-communist society. By looking at the Hungarian case, it is shown how commemorative practices are not only used to honour victims of a tragedy, but also to give form to a particular narrative, to delegitimise opposition and to assert political dominance in ways that affect the state of democracy in a country. It demonstrates that the politics of memory is not in the periphery, but in the centre of modern Hungarian politics. As a consequence of all that was mentioned above, the central research question guiding this thesis is the following:

how does the memory of Hungarian communism and its demise in 1989 help to understand the political success of Fidesz from 1998 to 2022?

Research Design & Methodology

The research design for this study is historical analysis. The main methods that will be employed are literature research and primary and secondary source analysis. The scholarly literature on memory and the politics of memory will be introduced by way of its most relevant theories and concepts in the theoretical framework, and in the subsequent main analysis, the literature on the Hungarian memory of (the fall of) communism and on Fidesz will be considered. Following this consideration and the application of the main concepts identified from the memory literature, the influence that the Hungarian memory of the end of

its communist regime has had on the rise to political prominence of populist party Fidesz, is assessed.

Aside from the works in the existing literature, I will make use of articles, speeches, interviews, legal documents, and other official documents or communications, where this is possible. These sources will chiefly be produced by current Hungarian Prime Minister and Fidesz party leader Viktor Orbán, or by other Fidesz members. A proportion of the sources are available online in English, such as on the official website of the Hungarian Prime Minister and its archives, though most will have been quoted or discussed in the literature. Thus, I have included relevant materials that meet the following criteria: they originate from Fidesz-affiliated figures, they contain implicit or explicit references to communism or 1989, and they are publicly available or cited in reputable literature.

The period of 1998 to 2022 is chosen as a contextual time frame. It starts in 1998, as Fidesz first gained governmental power in this year, keeping it until the loss in the 2002 election, with Orbán filling the position of prime minister over that same period. However, Fidesz did remain popular, and this popularity grew steadily since 2006, before culminating in the 2010 election win that secured a two-thirds majority for the first time and saw Orbán retake the office of prime minister. In the subsequent elections of 2014, 2018 and 2022, Fidesz also emerged victorious, holding on to this constitutional majority. The reason 2022 is chosen as an end date as opposed to 2010, is that even after this second electoral win, Fidesz has made significant efforts to increasingly consolidate its grip on power in Hungary, such as the introduction of a new constitution in 2011. In 2022, Fidesz won their third consecutive and fourth overall election in a landslide victory, despite united opposition. This serves, in my view, as a climactic moment and the culmination of twelve years of power consolidation. Furthermore, it can be argued that after 2022, Hungary has entered into a new phase politically, with new challenges like the war in Ukraine and its geopolitical fallout, facing the country.

As the period from 1998 to 2022 spans well over two decades, not every single event of note will be analysed, for that is beyond the scope of this thesis paper. However, as mentioned, this period will provide the temporal background, and out of this setting it will be divided into different parts and highlight particular important episodes. I will begin my analysis by providing an introduction on communist rule in Hungary and its demise during the events of 1989. After this, I will examine Fidesz's first term in power from 1998 to 2002, as their ideological rebranding crystallised and featured early uses of anticommunism and a framing of 1989 as unfinished. Next, the period from 2002 to 2010 will be discussed, in which Fidesz

made another shift and heavily used memory politics following a 2006 scandal, mobilising the Hungarian populace to set the stage for their 2010 election win. The time from this victory to their latest in 2022 forms the final part of the analysis, as it coincides with the consolidation of political power and the institutionalisation of an anti-communist narrative with the promise of 1989 as being finally realised by Fidesz.

Theoretical Framework

In order to ensure a common understanding of the terms that are used in this research paper, an overview of the development of the literature on memory will be provided, as well as an explanation of its most relevant theories and concepts. One concept that has been especially foundational to memory studies and thus to the politics of memory, is that of *collective memory*. Building on the work of philosophers Henri Bergson and Émile Durkheim, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs advanced this idea throughout the first half of the 20th century. Having been a student of Bergson, Halbwachs initially adopted an emphasis on personality and subjectivity in his work on memory. He would later go on to distance himself from Bergson, however, instead relying on Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness to develop his own work on collective memory (Marcel & Mucchielli, 2008, p. 141). Halbwachs contended that memory is not purely individual, but has a collective dimension as

well. Memory is constructed by interactions within families, religious communities or other social groups as they assign meaning to memories and provide social frameworks within which the past is remembered (pp. 141-145). According to Halbwachs, this remembrance is inherently selective and often subject to reinterpretation, due to evolving communal and societal needs – some elements might be emphasised, while others are (deliberately) forgotten. These notions can also be transposed to society at large, for it is argued that a society is a social group in its own right (pp. 144-146). A final point Halbwachs makes is that collective memory might become materialised in certain locations, monuments or traditions, which function as tangible means for keeping memory alive (pp. 145-148).

Pierre Nora expanded on this last notion of Halbwachs, as he introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory (Nora, 1989). These *lieux* refer to the symbols, monuments, archives and rituals that have come to serve as substitutes for the fading *milieux de mémoire* – environments in which memory is naturally embedded, such as community or family traditions (p. 7). As these organic environments have disappeared, *lieux de mémoire* have taken on the role of synthetically maintaining spaces for the preservation of collective memory: "*lieux de mémoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally" (p. 12). These sites, whether material, symbolic or simply functional, play a crucial role in safeguarding collective memory and shaping a collective identity (pp. 18-19). Though Nora's work contains a certain nostalgic, depoliticised undertone and neglects to explicitly acknowledge how memory sites can be ideologically and politically contested, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* might prove useful for this research in analysing the materialisation of a particular collective memory.

Another significant and closely related contribution to the literature is put forward by Jan Assmann, who distinguished between two different forms of collective memory: *communicative* memory and *cultural* memory (Assmann, 1995). The former resembles Halbwachs' original idea most closely, as it refers to memory that follows from everyday interactions within a family or community and thus has an informal and personal character. It is dynamic and limited in its time scope, usually lasting only several generations (pp. 126-127). Because of this familial nature and its focus on interactions between individuals, it does not seem particularly relevant for this research, which is concerned with memory on a much larger scale.

However, Assmann's concept of cultural memory might be of more use, as he continues where Halbwachs stopped, understanding cultural memory to refer to "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity" (p. 132). In a sense, cultural memory represents an enlarged version of communicative memory, that also includes the more material forms of memory and, through its frequent institutionalisation, allows for the preservation of historical narratives, traditions and foundational myths, cultivating a strong sense of group identity (pp. 130-132). Lastly, Assmann implicitly mentions the selective nature of cultural memory, stating that only when a particular historical episode has relevance for identity, it is integrated. Reinterpretation of memories is possible when the contemporary situation demands it (pp. 130-132). Like Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, cultural memory is concerned with materialised memory and is significant for maintaining collective memory and identity, but it also includes more abstract frameworks, such as education and law. This makes it helpful for looking at the institutionalisation of narratives.

Building on the aforementioned authors and their theories, Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik develop a more explicitly political theory in the first chapter of their 2014 book. A new framework is presented to aid in understanding the engagement of societies with the politics of memory, and even though the publication is mainly concerned with memory in post-communist Europe, this framework contains concepts that have proven to be valuable tools for analysing any kind of political society (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Badescu, 2021; Saryusz-Wolska et al., 2022;). Because of this utility and the fact that Hungary is a post-communist country, Bernhard and Kubik's theory seems to be especially applicable to this research.

The first of the newly introduced concepts is that of *memory regimes*, referring to "a set of cultural and institutional practices that are designed to publicly commemorate and/or remember a single event, a relatively clearly delineated and interrelated set of events, or a distinguishable past process" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, pp. 15-16). The authors are particularly interested in *official* regimes, in which state institutions and political parties are heavily involved in public commemoration. Interacting within memory regimes are *mnemonic actors*, political players holding contrasting views of the past, which can be divided into four categories. Firstly, there are *mnemonic pluralists*, who encourage open debate on national memory and recognise the existence of multiple differing historical

perspectives. *Mnemonic abnegators* refrain from participating in memory politics in any way, as they are either not interested or fail to see the benefits of doing so. The teleological position taken by *mnemonic prospectives* leaves them fixated on the future, claiming to possess the solution to the historical question and aiming to mobilise the populace to establish a post-historical end state (pp. 13-14). Particularly prominent are so-called *mnemonic warriors*, who clearly distinguish themselves, as guardians of what they believe to be the true version of the past, from other actors that promote supposedly wrong or distorted historical visions (p. 13). Mnemonic warriors hold that historical truth should be foundational to the contemporary socio-political order and take a belligerent approach as they advocate for a single, authoritative interpretation of history, seeking to discredit and delegitimise their political opponents. This vision is often rooted in a mythologised past that is either a "paradise lost" or an undesirable anomaly that diverges from the standard historical path (p. 13). Either way, this past imbues historical events with symbolic meaning and provides important lessons for the present. Mnemonic warriors believe that the societal issues of today can only be solved in keeping with this one true historical narrative (p. 13). It remains to be seen which of these subtypes is most applicable to Fidesz, if they are applicable at all, but this will become apparent in the analysis.

Finally, Bernhard and Kubik argue that different societies constitute different memory regimes, depending on the kinds of mnemonic actors present and thus the level of contestation over the national historical narrative. Regimes are *fractured* if they contain mnemonic warriors and there is a conflict over the narrative, *pillarised* when mnemonic pluralists are in power and there is a peaceful coexistence of competing narratives, and *unified* when either most actors are abnegators and memory politics are avoided, or there is genuine agreement on a single narrative (pp. 16-18). Although the typological clarity of this overall theory is its main strength, it must also be met with caution, for it risks the oversimplification of complex political characteristics.

Taking a more legal approach to the politics of memory, Nikolay Koposov (2017) deals with the phenomenon of *memory laws* in Europe. This term can be used "in a broad sense encompassing all laws that regulate collective representations of the past and in the narrow sense of prohibitions on Holocaust denial and other similar legislation" (Koposov, 2017, p. 2). Initially coined to refer to French legislation penalising Holocaust denial and classifying specific events as crimes against humanity, the term is today widely used. Koposov's understanding is that the body of memory laws has a "hard core" consisting of legislation that criminalises certain statements on the past, as well as a sizable "periphery" that includes

declarative laws, laws on public commemoration, state symbols, street names, monuments, museums, archives or reparations (p. 6). Within the European context, memory laws were initially aligned with the shared trauma of the Holocaust and with the protection of liberal democratic values, but have increasingly been subject to manipulative, nationalist uses of history, expressing victimhood and the superiority of the nation (pp. 301-303). Koposov explains that memory legislation can be used by governments for legitimisation and the bolstering of emotional historical narratives that revolve around specific, symbolic events. This way, memory laws today play an important role in state propaganda, the creation of division and in shaping national identity, especially in (post-)authoritarian states (pp. 302-304).

A final concept, that adds what is missing in Koposov, is what Uladzislau Belavusau (2018) has deemed *mnemonic constitutionalism*. It refers to the use of constitutional and legal frameworks to regulate collective memory. Aside from memory laws, constitutions and judicial decisions are also used to shape a particular historical narrative that can, through this institutionalisation, be protected and enforced (Belavusau, 2018, 2022). According to Belavusau, public discourse about significant and painful historical events like genocide or totalitarianism is defined by these legal instruments, as they allow for governments to anchor a national identity and a related set of values in a state-sponsored historical paradigm. In some instances, the particular historical narrative is even embedded within the actual constitution (Belavusau, 2018). Both Koposov's and Belavusau's contributions might, like Asmann's, be convenient for analysing the institutionalisation of historical narratives, but specifically in legal frameworks.

In my analysis, I will draw upon the above-mentioned theories and concepts while discussing the literature on the Hungarian memory of communism and its fall in 1989. They will be applied to this literature in order to make a proper assessment of the role that the memory of 1989 has played in subsequent Hungarian politics and especially in the rise of Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz.

Analysis

This analysis starts with a brief overview of communism in Hungary and its collapse in 1989, providing the necessary historical context for understanding how that past has been remembered and politicised. In the sections that follow, the significance of this memory is traced across Fidesz's first governmental term (1998-2002), its years in opposition (2002-2010), and its second spell in power (2010-2022). By following this chronological structure, the analysis demonstrates the evolution of Fidesz's engagement with the memory of communism, revealing shifts in political strategy, (de)legitimisation of authority, and construction of identity.

From Communism to Democracy

Notwithstanding a short-lived communist government in 1919, Hungary had formally been communist since 1949, when a totalitarian regime was established that executed harsh repressions, indiscriminately targeting political officials and citizens (Antal, 2019). In October of 1956, a large anti-government and anti-Soviet uprising, subsequently known as the Hungarian Revolution, swept through the country. It saw Imre Nagy take on leadership of the revolution, seeking to reform Hungary. Though a Communist Party member, Nagy supported destalinisation, prioritising the rise of living standards, agricultural growth, production of consumer goods, and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. This was unacceptable to the Soviet Union, who brutally crushed the uprising with military force in early November. Under pressure from Moscow, János Kádár agreed to betray the revolution and became Hungary's new leader. Many people were imprisoned, deported or even executed, including

Nagy and his accomplices, for their role in what was deemed to be a ‘counterrevolution’ (Harms, 2017; Antal, 2019).

Kádár's regime differed from others in the Eastern Bloc, as he did not allow for a personality cult and gradually loosened restrictions. A deal was struck with Hungarian society, guaranteeing decent living standards and a degree of societal peace in exchange for the political passivity of the public (Antal, 2019). Since the 1960s, this pact was known as ‘goulash communism.’ As István Benczes (2016) explains, “it was hoped that a rising standard of living would lead to regime consolidation” (p. 149). The pact achieved results; real income tripled from 1956 to 1989 and the Hungarian economy was outperforming every Eastern Bloc country (Lendvai, 2017; Antal, 2019). Hungarians had more freedoms and were doing relatively well economically, and because of this situation and the definitive defeat of the 1956 ideals, no serious challenges to the status quo occurred in the following decades.

However, by the 1980s, the spending that enabled goulash communism had been racking up a sizable debt, as expenses were mostly financed by foreign loans (Bozóki & Simon, 2019). Due to economic stagnation and his declining health, Kádár was forced to resign in 1988. Meanwhile, criticism of the Hungarian regime intensified and Soviet leader Michail Gorbachev's reforms emboldened democratic opposition. Additionally, these measures created space for more radical reformers to rise to prominence within the Hungarian Communist Party, with Miklós Németh taking over power in early 1989. Németh was not necessarily against the communist system, but as public resistance became increasingly organised and demanded democratic rights and free elections, he acknowledged the insufficiency of internal reforms and the need for a democratic transition (Németh, 1997).

All over Eastern Europe, communist regimes were collapsing, and by watching the events of the Polish revolution, Németh got assurance that Gorbachev would not – as had happened in 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia – use military force to suppress any attempt at liberalisation. Thus, from May 1989, the Austrian-Hungarian border was gradually opened, leading to a wave of East Germans fleeing to Western Europe via Hungary, culminating in the so-called Pan-European Picnic in August of that year (Seleny, 2014). As a reckoning with the national trauma of the Hungarian Revolution, it was recognised as a legitimate uprising and Imre Nagy and his companions were publicly reburied. Over 250,000 people gathered to watch the ceremony on 16 June and members of the democratic opposition delivered speeches, including a 26-year-old Viktor Orbán. His short speech, in which he criticised the communist regime and demanded free elections, instantly propelled him to fame in Hungary and beyond (Lendvai, 2017).

The Polish example also inspired the Hungarian Round Table Talks, negotiations between the Communist Party and a coalition of democratic political groups that aimed to ensure the peaceful transfer of power and an orderly transition to democracy. One of the parties present was the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz), by then still a liberal student movement. The talks made possible the ultimately non-violent revolution in Hungary, which was fairly unique among the countries of the Communist Bloc. All sides proved very willing to engage in dialogue, likely following from a universal desire to avoid another 1956-like bloodshed (Bozóki & Simon, 2019). The Round Tables achieved the scheduling of free elections, constitutional reform, the establishment of democratic institutions, and the peaceful transition into a democratic republic, formally ending decades of one-party rule by the Hungarian Communist Party on 23 October, the anniversary of the 1956 revolution.

In that same month, the communists dissolved their Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and rebranded as the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). This new party was social-democratic, pro-Western, and in favour of a market economy (Bernhard, 2021). Many hardline communists left, but those that were more reform-minded, stayed, leading to a situation in which several members of the former communist regime were now the leaders of a democratic party. This proved to be controversial, and in the 1990 elections, the MSZP, unsurprisingly, did not receive many votes. As the subsequent sections will show, over the following decade, Fidesz would start to instrumentalise the memory of this communist past and the events of 1989, turning it into a potent political resource.

1998-2002: Right Party in Power

The 1990 elections were won by the centre-right Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). However, the social and economic costs that came with the transition from goulash communism resulted in public discontent (Antal, 2019), leading to a 1994 'return' to power for the post-communist successor party MSZP in a landslide victory. Nevertheless, power would change hands once again in 1998, as Fidesz won the elections for the first time. Important in this success was the party's political reorientation from a left-liberal youth party to a civic, centre-right faction, resulting from a need to distinguish itself from the centre-left ruling party (Lendvai, 2017). Fidesz, under Orbán's leadership, jumped into the discursive space on the right side of the political spectrum and chose to capitalise upon the imperfect nature of the 1989 agreements (Bernhard, 2021). Despite ultimately achieving results, the negotiation process had been rocky and required much compromise, which had led to lasting grievances. Michael Bernhard (2021), as well as William Partlett and Herbert Küpper (2022),

rightfully identify the inclusion of former communist elites in the transitional process and their subsequent rebranding as a significant aspect for understanding the path to Fidesz's takeover. Although broader structural dynamics were at play, this particular element allowed the party to claim that the 1989 agreements were illegitimate, as former communists had participated and supposedly made a deal that rigged the system in their favour, protecting their position (Bernhard, 2021).

The stance taken here by Fidesz can best be described as that of a mnemonic warrior, as it closely matches Bernhard and Kubik's definition of an actor that claims it knows what *really* happened, maintaining an alternative reading of the past, and that uses the memory of this particular historical event to delegitimise political opponents. Most scholars agree on this characterisation (Seleny, 2014; Harms, 2017; Bernhard, 2021). Taking the position of a mnemonic warrior created a fractured memory regime and was the start of Fidesz's increasingly fierce ideology of nationalist anti-communism as well as a habit of identifying political opponents, particularly the left, with communists. On the official website of the Prime Minister of Hungary, there is a section that provides a timeline of significant moments in Viktor Orbán's career, from 1988 to 2022. Short descriptions accompanying the events leading up to the 1998 election consistently refer to the MSZP as communists, as seen in quotes such as: "the communists are going to the polls; let's be there too!", "the return of the communists", "the communists were back", and "on the one side socialist forces, on the other citizens" (Prime Minister's Office, n.d.).[1] This reflects Fidesz's anti-communist narrative and corresponds with a tendency, taking root at the end of the 1990s, of presenting 1989 not necessarily as a clean break, but rather as an unsuccessful attempt at ousting communism, as there had been an apparent continuation of communist rule in Hungary (Bernhard, 2021; Gyollai, 2024).

If the MSZP were the communists, Fidesz had to embody the oppositional faction that sparked initial democratic resistance. Efforts were made by the party to frame itself as the moral heir of 1989, of which its appropriation of the national-conservative platform, formerly of the MDF, is the most poignant example. Another case is Fidesz's handling of the 1999 tenth anniversary of the Pan European Picnic. A large celebration was held commemorating the opening of the Iron Curtain between Hungary and Austria, but Hungary's ruling party was criticised as they asked important protagonists of the border's opening not to speak (Seleny, 2014). Instead, Fidesz member József Szájer emphasised the role of the Hungarian people

[1] https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/career/

and attributed the toppling of the border fence and eventually of communism to the citizens of Hungary (Szájer, 1999, as cited in Gioielli, 2020). However, in doing so, reform communists like Németh and their agency in events like the border opening, the Nagy reburial and the Round Table Talks, were ignored. This is part of a tactic by Fidesz to deliberately downplay the role reform communists played in the significant historical events of both 1956 and 1989 (Harms, 2017). Obviously, full mnemonic integration of figures like Nagy and Németh would be an admission of the feasibility of communist rule, which would have been counterproductive to Fidesz's initial goal of acquiring political power. Therefore, to the extent that principally Nagy was integrated, his image was morphed into a more nationalist figure (Seleny, 2014).

In February of 2002, Fidesz opened the House of Terror, a museum showcasing the horrors of Hungary's fascist and communist regimes. However, experts have characterised it as the epitome of Fidesz's historical mythmaking and a concrete representation of the party's historical narrative. Still open today, the museum has mostly functioned as a political tool or what Alexander Wells (2025) calls an "anticommunist memory project". The exhibit in the House of Terror has been criticised for its lack of historical nuance and its reliance on a "highly emotional appeal" (Harms, 2017, p. 490), combining personal testimonies, symbolic objects, dramatic music and shocking instances of violence, without providing much context. Though critics like Wells and Victoria Harms (2017) ridicule the almost theatrical atmosphere that this creates, its political effectiveness must not be underestimated, as the emotional intensity arguably enhances the museum's mnemonic power. Significantly, it presents the period between the Nazi-takeover in 1944 and the fall of communism in 1989 as a continuous period of terror, thereby conflating two very different systems of oppression and ignoring Hungarian collaboration with these regimes. Furthermore, the crimes of communism are disproportionately emphasised; a far greater number of rooms is dedicated to the communist than the fascist regime (Wells, 2025).

According to Peter Verovšek (2021), equating fascism and communism is a reaction to Western European Holocaust remembrance, and Wells (2025) points out it often ends up with the claim that communism was worse. This all fits into an overarching trend of presenting communism as an occupation imposed by a foreign power, namely the Soviet Union (Verovšek, 2021; Partlett & Küpper, 2022). Fidesz is able to play into Hungary's centuries-long experience of foreign occupation to frame its fight for political power as a fight for national sovereignty, and through the downplaying of Hungary's historical complicity, a sense of national victimhood and 'lost glory' is invented, rallying support for Fidesz's

narrative and political agenda. The party cleverly places itself into this national history as liberators, which is reflected by one museum room that shows Orbán's 1989 speech next to the retreat of Soviet tanks, suggesting Orbán and Fidesz kicked the Red Army out themselves (Harms, 2017).

When considering the memory literature, the retelling of Hungary's 20th century history as a national trauma resulting in the need to reclaim a lost glory is another confirmation of Fidesz's identity as a mnemonic warrior. But, I would argue that, because the House of Terror institutionalises a particular narrative and is important in cultivating a common cultural identity through texts, objects and images by selectively presenting historical episodes, it is also a prime example of Assmann's cultural memory. Additionally, the museum serves as a *lieu de mémoire* due to its creation specifically for the preservation of a particular collective memory. It has been artificially supporting Fidesz's historical narrative for over two decades now.

Despite the party's reorientation, its framing of 1989 as incomplete and the dissemination of its historical narrative through the House of Terror, which deliberately opened just weeks before the 2002 Hungarian elections, Fidesz was initially unable to convince the Hungarian public to a sufficient extent. A very close electoral race ultimately brought the MSZP into the seat of government once again.

2002-2010: Return to Opposition

The 2002 election loss shocked Orbán and the Fidesz leadership. Prevailing economic dissatisfaction, the polarising platform Fidesz campaigned on and the moderate alternative offered by the MSZP seem to have been decisive (Lendvai, 2017). Orbán chose to double down on the nationalist rhetoric and another shift was made; from the centre-right to a populist and far-right ideology (Antal, 2019). Fidesz continued and even intensified its anti-communism and nationalism, with the associated framing of the MSZP as communists and Fidesz as true defenders of national sovereignty. Though, now not just Hungarian sovereignty, but the entire Hungarian identity was at stake. Fidesz began creating a narrative of two versions of Hungary: one civic, moral, Christian, and democratic (represented by Fidesz); the other cosmopolitan, corrupt, atheistic, and communist (embodied by the MSZP). This idea of two different Hungaries is exemplified by Orbán's 2002 speech, in which he (in)famously stated: “it may be that our parties and our representatives are in opposition in the National Assembly, but we who are here on the square will not and also cannot be in opposition, because *the homeland cannot be in opposition* [emphasis added]” (Orbán, 2002,

as cited in Kim, 2020, p. 337). Here, “the homeland,” synonymous with ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’, is pitted against a “foreign-like” elite (p. 338), again reflecting the idea of victimhood inflicted upon the nation by external forces. In its oppositional role, Fidesz heavily criticised the MSZP-government and the incompletion of the 1989 revolution was further emphasised, deliberately obscuring its liberal democratic nature, in light of the socialist-liberal underpinnings of the government coalition (Harms, 2017). Despite Fidesz's fierce campaigning, the 2006 election repeated the preceding result of a narrow victory for the MSZP.

However, in September of 2006, a speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, held at a classified meeting of MSZP officials, was leaked and broadcast on national radio. In the profane address, Gyurcsány admitted that the MSZP “lied morning, noon and night” about the state of Hungary's economy and had enacted no significant measures to date (Gyurcsány, 2006). This led to a nationwide crisis with intense public outrage and mass protests; in Budapest, large groups of protestors were met with violence by riot police. The scandal provided Fidesz the perfect opportunity to use memory politics to illegitimise the government, asserting that the revolution had been betrayed in 1989 by the communists and their successors were morally betraying the Hungarian nation once again today (Seleny, 2014). For many, the crisis confirmed Fidesz’s mnemonic warrior narrative, and the party was able to weaponise it for the mobilisation of a large number of people, as it organised its own protests. The parallels with the communist past were inescapable, as the events were full of communist symbolism: Gyurcsány had used 1956 language in his speech, the brutal police repression was used to invoke memories of the 1956 revolution, and 23 October 2006 would mark the 50-year anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. Fidesz, with the help of sympathetic media outlets and the House of Terror, was able to stage a 1956 commemoration according to its own interpretation (Harms, 2017).

Looking at the events of 2006, it appears as though 1956 has been instrumental to Fidesz’s mnemonic tactics. Anna Seleny (2014) and Harms (2017) both point to the deep mnemonic relation between 1956 and 1989, and even argue that the former is more relevant to Fidesz than the latter. Although I disagree with this last assertion, the connectedness of both years must be acknowledged; the proclamation of the democratic Hungarian state in 1989 was deliberately made on 23 October, the anniversary of the start of the 1956 revolution, so as to signal the perserverance and continued influence of its ideals (Harms, 2017). Furthermore, as Seleny notes, the memory of 1956 was key for Fidesz's introduction of a “revolution twice betrayed: first by the communists and their Soviet overlords, and then decades later by a

“pseudo-transition” that failed to sweep away the socialists” (Seleny, 2014 pp. 38-39). This corresponds to the already mentioned notion of a perceived continuation of communist rule after 1989.

Even so, I believe it is a step too far to claim, in the words of Harms, “1989's irrelevance in Hungary” (Harms, 2017, p. 480). For the notion of a revolution twice betrayed, both 1956 *and* 1989 are necessary. Furthermore, 1989 and the subsequent post-communist betrayal had become the foundational myth of Fidesz; the party was formed during the tensions leading up to the revolution, it participated in the Round Tables, and claimed to be heir of the 1989 ideals. The memory of 1989 had also been instrumental in winning political power for the first time in 1998, and during Fidesz's first government provided democratic legitimacy and moral authority, especially relative to its political opponents. Additionally, for Fidesz’s second governmental stint from 2010, it provided a direct link with democratic institutions, and would legitimise their dismantling in the following years, under the banner of fulfilling the promise of 1989. So, even though 1989 went slightly to the background between 2002 and 2010, it was still deeply relevant in a quieter way.

Gyurcsány and the MSZP were able to remain in power, but the following years, Fidesz continued to build a broad nationalist movement, framing itself as the authentic voice of the people and their struggle as one rooted in historical resistance to left-wing regimes. The 2008 global financial crisis only worsened Hungary's financial situation, and the government-imposed austerity measures were wildly unpopular (Kim, 2020). At this point, as a result from the disappointment in liberal democracy and the betrayal of its social-democratic disciples, Fidesz’s discourse had become increasingly undemocratic, anti-Western and anti-EU (Antal, 2019). The close cooperation between the social-democratic government and the EU led to resentment, and Orbán's party would often claim that cosmopolitan elites and globalisation were threatening Hungarian culture (Bernhard, 2021). In order for the Hungarian people to become sovereign from this new foreign domination once again, Fidesz had to come to power and hold on to it “for at least fifteen to twenty years” (Orbán, 2010, as cited in Seleny, 2014). Only Fidesz could fulfil the promise of 1956 and 1989.

In this period in opposition, Fidesz had again exercised its role as mnemonic warrior. It challenged and illegitimised the established order by expanding on the narrative of an unfinished revolution, using the memory of communism to draw connections to the present, and employing a dual narrative of Hungary. The party claimed to be the guardian of the ‘true’ ideals of 1956 and 1989, according to which society should ideally be organised. However, Fidesz's increasingly teleological stance, stressing the necessity of the expulsion of

communist or foreign elites in order to mobilise the Hungarian nation to take back sovereignty by voting for Fidesz, is typical of mnemonic prospectives. This reflects the risk I pointed out in the theoretical framework; the typological clarity of Bernhard and Kubik's theory passes by complex political realities, in which it is possible that a particular actor possesses qualities that belong to different types of mnemonic actors, as appears to be the case with Fidesz here.

Anyway, by 2009, Fidesz's political tactics were bearing fruit; the MSZP government stepped down and a landslide victory was achieved by Fidesz in the European Parliament elections. It organised referenda and aligned itself with civil society groups in its efforts to mobilise the Hungarian populace to once again oust the (post-)communists. The loss of trust in the left, the economic and political crises, and Fidesz's narratives, combined to realise 2010's "voting booth revolution" (Orbán, 2010, as cited in Harms, 2017, p. 492).

2010-2022: Consolidation

Fidesz won dominantly in 2010: a constitutional majority was achieved, allowing the party to bring its political plans into effect, leading Orbán to allude to the completion of the 1989 revolution by Fidesz (Seleny, 2014; Harms, 2017). To structurally implement this accomplishment, the party crafted a new constitution, the Fundamental Law of Hungary, which was unilaterally adopted in 2011. Through legal and institutional restructuring, it transformed the Hungarian state and entrenched Fidesz's political power as democratic checks and balances were weakened (Partlett & Küpper, 2022). Additionally, it formally institutionalised Fidesz's ideological and historical narrative.

The constitution's preamble designates Hungary's previous framework, which was written into the pre-existing communist constitution in 1989 and 1990, as "the communist constitution of 1949" and is explicitly denounced for its service as "the basis for tyrannical rule" (Fundamental Law, 2024, Preamble). This rejection is not simply a legal gesture, but simultaneously operates to delegitimise both the communist regime *and* the liberal-democratic period between 1989 and 2010, reinforcing the notion of Fidesz's 2010 victory as the finalisation of a regime change.

Furthermore, the preamble emphasises Hungary's Christian roots, reflecting the Christian nationalism that Fidesz already embraced during its first government (Harms, 2017), as a counterpart to communist ideology. Also, symbolic references to St. Stephen and the Holy Crown signify – in Partlett and Küpper's (2022) words – a "return to normality" (p. 118).

This quest for normality frames the communist era as an 'ahistorical' period, a diversion from the state's natural historical path. It places Hungary's authentic identity in a pre-communist past and casts Fidesz's Fundamental Law as the restoration of the country to its rightful historical path. Of course, this positioning of communism as outside of history, is consistent with the mnemonic warrior vision.

Closely tied to this return to normality are the ideas of victimhood and foreign occupation, which are also present in the preamble, as it refers to "the inhuman crimes committed against the Hungarian nation and its citizens under the national socialist and the communist dictatorship" (Fundamental Law, 2024, Preamble). Moreover, Hungary's self-determination is said to have been "lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944" (the start of the Nazi-occupation) and restored "from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected organ of popular representation was formed."

Finally, the constitutional preamble contains (ethno)nationalist language, as evidenced by the frequent use of terms like "nation," "the Hungarian people," "nationhood," "heritage," "national culture," and "identity" (Fundamental Law, 2024, Preamble). By linking constitutional identity to a specific notion of Hungarian identity, the text marginalises those who do not fit into the Christian, Hungarian majority, or political opponents who do not agree with this identity narrative. This is amplified by the repeated use of "we", which also works to claim sovereignty on behalf of the Hungarian people, as rooted in a specific culture and history.

Article U, added in 2013, reflects fervent anti-communism through its legal condemnation of the communist past, even criminalising institutions like the Communist Party, and enabling retroactive legal consequences for former communist actors (Fundamental Law, 2024, Art. U). Though this particular part has proven to be largely symbolical (Lendvai, 2017), the overall article reinforces, again, the narrative of victimhood. Nonetheless, the main focus is not the foreign Soviet Union, but the domestic Hungarian communists, as is reflected by the criminalisation of the Communist Party and the legal implications for its members (Partlett & Küpper, 2022). Article U is also explicitly concerned with memory, as it established a committee "in order for the State to preserve the memory of the communist dictatorship" (Fundamental Law, 2024, Art. U).

Articles E and R emphasise popular sovereignty, which, as Verovšek (2021) argues, is less about the protection of democratic rights, but more about self-government and resistance to external interference. In Article E, EU membership is acknowledged, but EU law is

subordinated to Hungary's own constitution (Fundamental Law, 2024, Art. E). This reflects Fidesz's already mentioned tendency to present the EU and its associated liberal democracy as a new imperial power, out for the domination of the Hungarian people. Casting Brussels as a new Moscow had been an important theme during the 2010 election and would become increasingly prominent over the following years. Orbán's rhetoric clearly shows this, claiming that like Hungary's resistance to Vienna and Moscow, “we will not let anybody dictate to us now either, from Brussels or anywhere else” (Orbán, 2011), and that Europeans have a duty “to save Brussels from becoming Sovietized” (Orbán, 2016).

As the influence of the post-communists waned, the EU and liberalism became useful new scapegoats, to which the already existing framework of anti-communism and the historical experience of foreign control could now be applied, in order to consolidate Fidesz's political position. By using the collective memory of communism in Hungary, Fidesz claimed that they, just like they had done in 1989, were once again defending the country (Verovšek, 2021). It justified media regulation, judicial reforms, attacks on academia, and harsh anti-migration policies – all under the guise of protection against foreign influence and the reclaiming of national control (Vachudova, 2020). In their 2014 re-election, Fidesz held on to the constitutional majority, and months later, an emboldened Orbán would attach a formal label to Fidesz's political project: the establishment of “illiberal democracy” (Orbán, 2014).

Fidesz also made efforts to institutionalise narratives via the takeover of historical and academic institutions (Harms, 2017; Pető, 2022; Wells, 2025). The project of recasting 1989 not as the birth of liberal democracy but as an incomplete process of ousting communism, only fulfilled by Fidesz in 2010, is supported by the marginalisation of critical historical institutions. Harms (2017) names the example of the 1956 Institute; once a producer of nuanced accounts of the 1956 revolution and Hungarian communism, its funding was suspended by Fidesz until it was absorbed into newly created, state-controlled research institutes. These bodies blur historical nuances with their unscientific methods, to fit the desired mnemonic narrative (Harms, 2017). However, Harms fails to consider the fate of Hungary's educational institutions. Andrea Pető (2022) does provide an in-depth account of the extension of memory politics into education and academia. The imposition of a single, state-approved history textbook, the closure of critical study programmes, and the appointment of Fidesz-loyalists on university boards are all reflective of what Pető deems an “illiberal polypore state, because it feeds on the vital resources of the previous political system while simultaneously contributing to its decay by setting up parallel institutions” (p.

247). In this way, historical revisionism is executed to achieve alignment with the official narrative.

In December 2018, months after another Fidesz election win, a statue of Imre Nagy was relocated from its spot near the Hungarian Parliament to a less prominent place in Budapest and replaced by a 1934 monument to the victims of the 1919 communist regime. Critics condemned this action as historical revisionism downplaying Nagy's democratic legacy and reintegrating the Miklós Horthy regime, notorious for its anti-Semitic policies (Walker, 2019). Orbán declared it to be part of the restoration of the area to its pre-1944 state. As Vivian Walker (2019) explains, this reflects Fidesz's "brick-and-mortar revisionism," altering public spaces to coordinate it with a nationalist, anti-communist narrative that obscures the darker chapters of Hungary's history. Obviously, the replacement of Nagy's statue also reflects the idea of victimhood and the return to normality. Furthermore, it shows how Fidesz's anti-communism has evolved from praising Nagy to downplaying his role in Hungarian history. In my opinion, this confirms that Seleny and Harms were wrong to suggest the indispensability of 1956 to Fidesz, as this incident shows that it is more about a general anti-communism and even illiberalism, which had made a figure like Nagy a less-than-ideal representative of Hungary's struggle for self-determination against liberal democracy.

By claiming the completion of the 1989 revolution, Fidesz's mnemonic prospective qualities had been fulfilled, but its role as mnemonic warrior prevailed after 2010, revealed by the efforts to build Hungary's foundations on the one supposedly true historical narrative. The Fundamental Law deals with the legal institutionalisation of a specific political memory. As it is a constitution, it is an obvious representation of mnemonic constitutionalism, though, it could be argued that particular parts of the constitution, such as the criminalisation of communist organisations in Article U, constitute memory laws. In this case, following Koposov, the Fundamental Law is not part of the hard core of memory laws, but of the periphery. Either way, the Fundamental Law does fit in with legislation manipulatively used by governments to express victimhood and bolster national narratives around symbolic events. Furthermore, the constitution is, like the takeover of institutions and the removal of the Nagy statue, an institutionalisation of a selective memory and thus an instance of cultural memory. Finally, the statue's relocation forms a clear example of one *lieu de mémoire* being replaced by another, since they are explicitly material and symbolic sites that were placed to artificially preserve a previously 'forgotten' memory.

In 2022, Fidesz took their largest ever victory, despite the serious challenge of a unified opposition. It showed the degree of power consolidation Fidesz had acquired, and, today, it does not seem that they are going to give away this power anytime soon.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the ways in which the memory of Hungarian communism and its fall in 1989 might help to understand Fidesz's political success between 1998 and 2022. Through a literature- and source analysis, as well as the application of politics of memory theory, it has shown that Fidesz has skilfully used memory politics to instrumentalise Hungary's collective memory of communist rule and the 1989 transition for the construction of a nationalist narrative of victimhood and resistance, that justifies its illiberal agenda as the continuation of a struggle for political and cultural sovereignty.

In its first governmental period, Fidesz rebranded itself by adopting a centre-right position and a more intense form of anti-communism, taking a mnemonic warrior stance to present the 1989 compromise and the post-communist successor party as illegitimate. Supported by the use of cultural memory and *lieux de mémoire* like the House of Terror, a narrative of anti-communism and the 1989 revolution as unfinished, was created. The 2002 election loss inspired another shift, but Fidesz continued as mnemonic warrior to challenge the establishment, creating the nationalist narrative of two Hungaries. The 2006 crisis strengthened the delegitimisation of the post-communist government and Fidesz showed mnemonic prospective characteristics in its efforts to mobilise the population to bring the party in power to, as they framed it, finish the revolution. From 2010 onwards, a mnemonic warrior historical narrative, rooted in a fight for national sovereignty against foreign occupation, was institutionalised by a new constitution. It was said to complete the 1989 revolution. This form of mnemonic constitutionalism and cultural memory combined with the

takeover of institutions and the deliberate positioning of *lieux de mémoire*. The existing anti-communist framework was used for a new anti-EU, illiberal narrative that warrants Fidesz's power consolidation.

These findings have important implications, as the case of Fidesz in Hungary illustrates that memory is not merely a symbolic reflection of the past, but a potent political resource that shapes actual governance. Furthermore, it shows that post-communist societies are vulnerable to revisionist narratives that threaten democratic sustainability, as is echoed by trends in post-communist states like Russia and Poland. The strengths of this thesis lie in its original and timely subject matter, the effective use of theories and concepts of memory studies to showcase how history is weaponised for political ends, and its strong empirical scope, combining literature, legal texts, speeches and symbolic acts. However, limitations are the potential overemphasis on Fidesz's strategic coherence, as memory politics can be a process of trial and error, its limited attention to the reception of the narratives by civil society, and the possible understating of the influence of (socio)economic factors in post-1989 Hungarian society.

Further research could expand on this analysis by presenting a contemporary account of how the memory of communism and an anti-communist narrative might be utilised in other Central or Eastern European countries for the delegitimisation of liberal institutions and opposition to the European Union.

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